



# City of Seattle

Mike McGinn, Mayor

## Seattle Human Rights Commission

April 9, 2012

Council Member Nick Licata, Chair  
City Council Committee on Housing, Human Services, Health, and Culture  
600 Fourth Avenue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Seattle, WA 98104

Dear Chairman Licata:

The mission of the Seattle Human Rights Commission is to promote human rights for the residents of Seattle and facilitate the prevention and elimination of discrimination. To promote equality and justice is to ensure Seattle families have healthy and safe homes. We recommend the Department review and implement policy options that ensure adequate housing so renters have safe and healthy housing without the fear of retaliation.

There are human rights issues at play that are of concern to the Commission. The right to adequate, safe, and healthy housing is contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Specifically:

**Article 11.** Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing. Everyone has the right to be free from hunger.

**Article 12.** Everyone has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

The term "adequate housing" has been defined by the UN ICESCR Treaty Committee to comprise security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy.

The Commission is particularly concerned with access to safe and healthy housing and any disproportionate impact on low-income families and communities of colors. These groups are more likely to live in substandard housing. Research from the American Housing Survey compared with census data and the City's own numbers shows that only 5% of the estimated 27,000 possible code violations in Seattle are reported to DPD. The current system for reporting code violations poses significant challenges for Seattle families, especially among marginalized communities. Many families do not know that code enforcement exists, and when they do, they do not contact code enforcement out of fear of retaliation, thus inhibiting the effectiveness of current city policy.

We urge you to investigate policies and actions that will provide adequate housing so that all renters are ensured safe and healthy housing without the fear of retaliation. Specifically, policies should:

- *Rely upon interior inspections rather than exterior inspections;*
- *Address issues with the complaint process around access and utilization.*
- *Develop avenues to educate tenants of their rights.*
- *Educate landlords of their responsibilities.*
- *Decrease retaliation for filing complaints.*

Everyone, regardless of race, gender, age and circumstances deserves a safe and healthy place to live. We appreciate your efforts to make this a reality in Seattle.

Sincerely,

Chris Stearns, Chairman

cc: Diane Sugimura, Director, Seattle Department of Planning and Development

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